Homelessness & Disaster Response: Essential Tips for Planners

Why It Matters

People experiencing homelessness are among the **first impacted, most severely affected, and least likely to recover** after disasters. Without targeted planning, they may be excluded from emergency alerts, evacuation efforts, and recovery resources. **This document provides high-level considerations for emergency planners** with the aim of integrating homelessness into disaster planning.

Local geography and conditions may require additional planning to address unique challenges. For deeper guidance, see HUD guidance here.

Key Planning Considerations

🏠 Address & Residency Barriers

Disaster aid often requires proof of residency, which can exclude unsheltered individuals.

Action Steps:

- **Allow shelter addresses or service provider attestations** for eligibility
- **Accept address proxies** like library cards, benefit enrollment, or family ties
- **Train intake staff** on flexible verification methods

♿ Accessibility

People with disabilities face compounded risks during disasters.

Action Steps:

- **Reserve ADA-compliant spaces** in shelters
- **Provide language access** (ASL, Spanish, and other common languages)
- **Ensure accessible transportation** options for evacuation

💊 Medical & Mental Health Services

Loss of medications or care continuity can be life-threatening.

Action Steps:

- **Pre-plan for prescription refills** and medical transport post-disaster
- **Coordinate with behavioral and mental health providers** for crisis support
- **Stock shelters with basic medical supplies** and hygiene kits

📣 Communication

Traditional alerts (TV, radio) rarely reach unsheltered individuals.

Action Steps:

- **Use trusted messengers** (EMTs, outreach workers, peer navigators, etc.)
- **Post alerts** at soup kitchens, libraries, shelters, and warming/cooling centers
- **Prioritize sending medical and outreach responders** before law enforcement when possible to reduce fear and increase engagement (see HUD guidance)

🤝 Coordination

Fragmented response leaves gaps for vulnerable populations.

Action Steps:

- **Engage VOADs, COADs, homeless coalitions, and EM agencies early**
- **Define roles and responsibilities** in written agreements
- **Include homeless service providers** in Emergency Operations Centers
- **Secure emergency funding streams or reimbursement mechanisms** for homeless service providers offering disaster-related services

🎒 Preparedness & Staff Training

Plans fail without practice.

Action Steps:

- **Conduct annual or biannual live trainings** with all key partners
- **Train staff on trauma-informed care and de-escalation techniques** to reduce harm and build trust during crises
- **Evaluate if homeless populations were reached and supported**
- **Update policies and fill gaps** based on lessons learned

Texas Geography Considerations

- **Extreme heat events:** Plan for **24/7 cooling centers**, hydration stations, and outreach to unsheltered individuals during prolonged heat waves
- **Wildfires and drought in rural areas:** Pre-position food and potable water for remote communities
- **Gulf Coast hurricanes & flooding:** Plan for mass evacuation and sheltering plans for displaced individuals
- **Winter storms:** Plan for **24/7 warming centers** that operate day and night and transport, particularly for rural areas
- **Sparse public transportation and limited cell service:** Deploy mobile communication units and shuttle systems

Next Steps for Emergency Planners

- Share this guidance with local partners
- Incorporate homeless-specific strategies into your Emergency Operations Plan
- Engage with people with lived experience of homelessness in planning efforts
- Connect with THN for technical assistance and coordination support

Quick-Reference Checklist for Emergency Planners

Include People Experiencing Homelessness in Disaster Planning

Before a Disaster

- ❑ Identify homeless service providers and include them in planning committees
- ❑ Develop flexible residency verification (shelter address, provider attestation)
- ❑ Ensure ADA-compliant shelter spaces and language access
- ❑ Pre-plan for medication refills and mental health support
- ❑ Establish communication channels (outreach workers, libraries, soup kitchens)
- ❑ Train staff on trauma-informed care and de-escalation
- ❑ Conduct live exercises with VOADs, COADs, and homeless coalitions

During a Disaster

- ❑ Use trusted messengers (EMTs, outreach teams) for alerts
- ❑ Provide transportation for evacuation (including accessible options)
- ❑ Stock shelters with hygiene kits and basic medical supplies
- ❑ Ensure secure storage for belongings
- ❑ Maintain clear roles and responsibilities for all partners

After a Disaster

- ❑ Assist with recovery resources (ID replacement, benefits access)
- ❑ Track needs and eligibility using Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) or similar systems
- ❑ Evaluate gaps and update plans for future events